



Indian Country and President Obama's Second Term

by Ernest L. Stevens, Jr.

As he begins his second term, President Barack Obama has made his commitments to work with Indian Country and follow-up on his first four years of productive engagement with tribal governments. It was special to be in Washington, alongside so many of our tribal leaders and NIGA members at the Inauguration. The President's speech was a powerful reminder of the hard work and personal responsibility that we all have to this democracy. During his 2008 campaign, President Obama made promises to meet with tribal nations on an annual basis along with other commitments to strengthen the government-to-government relationship and tribal self-determination. Without question, President Obama has delivered on these promises and more.

Early in his first term, President Obama directed all federal agencies to submit progress reports on how the agency is meeting its government-to-government consultation responsibilities. To further strengthen the voice of Indian Country within the Administration, President Obama hired a number of qualified professionals from Indian Country to serve in the White House and throughout the various agencies, posts dedicated to meeting the government's treaty and trust obligations to Indian tribes that never before existed. We now need to build on the momentum gained in the first term, implement the policy successes garnered, and set and meet new goals.

As the National Indian Gaming Association heads to Phoenix for our annual Tradeshow and Convention, Indian gaming's success stories will be on full display. In January of 2013, the Arizona Indian Gaming Association (AIGA) released an economic impact study reporting that Indian gaming in Arizona has directly created more than 15,000 jobs, ranking above mining and logging in the state. When you add in indirect jobs, like construction, the Arizona Indian gaming employment numbers grow to more than 22,000. This AIGA report is confirmation of what Indian gaming can bring to a community. Thanks to strong tribal governments and their leadership, there is a drive and initiative to create a sustainable economy where both tribal nations and their neighbors benefit.

In our industry, our tribal members are taking responsibility for this growth. According to *Indian Country Today*, at the end of January, the Pasqua Yaqui tribal council appointed Alex Armador as Chief Executive Officer of their casino, Casino Del Sol. From the Navajo Nation

Gaming Enterprise, Derrick Watchman, a Navajo tribal member, has been appointed to CEO and has been serving since the first of January. Their success and promotions define what Indian Gaming enterprise is all about; developing our tribal members to take the next leadership steps towards securing our economic future.

As I stood close to my wife, alongside the thousands of other citizens of this nation, President Obama said in his inauguration, "We, the people, still believe that our obligations as Americans are not just to ourselves, but to all posterity." As I held Cheryl's hand during the time of prayer, I thought strongly of our future generations and our promise to continue to build healthy and sustainable communities. So many of our tribes still need the basics of infrastructure development and educational enrichment, and I am optimistic to see growth in these next four years with the support of our President.

There is an enduring quality that our tribal nations share; that this obligation to our people is deeply rooted in our sovereignty and right to self-determination. The Indian gaming industry is a key to attaining these goals for our communities and our neighbors.

Just this January, the *Las Vegas Review Journal* reported that construction crews topped off the final 75-ft. long steel beam on the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria's 320,000 sq. ft. gaming facility in Rohnert Park, CA. The Graton Resort and Casino is scheduled to open this year, and is estimated to bring permanent well-paying jobs and benefits to 2,000 Californian families.

The Suquamish Clearwater Casino Resort is getting ready to take on their largest expansion yet. Construction begins this year and will end in 2017. According to the *Kitsap Sun*, Port Madison Enterprises, the business arm of the Suquamish tribe, will add an updated convention and meeting space that will grow to 27,835 sq. ft., a larger parking lot and an additional 100-room hotel wing to their facilities. The facility's expansion is expected to create about 170 new full- and part-time jobs for Washington State families, adding to the 790 current jobs they offer now.

The Quapaw Tribe and NIGA Associate Member Klas-Robinson, released a study that estimated the Downstream Casino Resort has created more than 1,640 permanent jobs with total annual workers' earnings of over \$58 million.

These are just a few stories of many successes reflecting on the strong economic development our industry is

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creating around our nation. These are the stories we share with Congress when our tribal leaders are in Washington, D.C. During the inauguration weekend, NIGA took the opportunity to meet for a one-day policy summit to enable tribal leaders to sit down and meet with new members of Congress.

NIGA members from the Lummi Nation, the Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation and the leaders from the Great Plains supported this conference and helped our messaging on the key concern of the IRS's extensive audits of tribal governments. The IRS's interactions are a major issue facing Indian Country right now and NIGA will continue to work with our sister organizations to make sure tribal governments are afforded the same respect as state governments when it comes to IRS inquiries.

Inauguration day provided a sense of renewed hope and optimism to this nation and for Indian Country. We are fortunate to have a President who will remain an active participant in moving Indian Country forward. President Obama concluded his speech with these words, "[We] have the obligation to shape the debates of our time... with the voices we lift in defense of our most ancient values and enduring ideals." These are ideals that Indian Country has long fought for, and I hope we can continue to share Indian Country's values and ideals into the next four years of the Obama Administration. ♣

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